

Research in progress: Cuban and Samaná Haitian as windows on Creole genesis

Bart Jacobs¹ (Leiden University Centre for Linguistics)

Abstract

This paper provides the outlines of a postdoc project on two diasporic varieties of Haitian Creole, which is currently being carried out by the author at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics. The project aims at documenting the Haitian Creole varieties spoken by Haitian migrants in Cuba and the Dominican Republic's Samaná Peninsula. These two diasporic varieties have developed in relative isolation from Haiti and can thus be expected to be linguistically conservative. By documenting these varieties, the project strives to provide a window on the early stages of the development of Haitian Creole and, in doing so, to make a breakthrough in the ongoing debate on creole genesis, a debate in which Haitian Creole plays a pivotal role.

1 Introduction

This paper provides the outlines of a postdoc project on two diasporic varieties of Haitian Creole. The project, written in 2011 and awarded an NWO Veni Grant in July 2012, is currently (as of March 2013) being carried out by the author at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics.²

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2 Background and goals of the project

The colonial expansion in the 16th to 19th centuries and subsequent linguistic encounters between European and African languages led to the emergence of a number of new and heavily restructured language varieties, better known as pidgins and creoles. Although the lexicon of these young languages is typically derived from the respective

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colonial language, the origins of their grammar are heavily debated, yielding a variety of genesis hypotheses ranging from Bickerton's (1981) Language Bioprogram to complex relexification schemes (Voorhoeve 1973; Lefebvre 1986) and from abrupt (Thomason & Kaufmann 1988) to gradual (Arends 1989) scenarios of creole genesis.

Haitian Creole (henceforth HC), one of over a dozen creoles whose lexicon is based on French, plays a central role in this debate. HC was presumably formed between 1650 and 1750 and has developed into the mother tongue of most of the *ca.* seven million inhabitants of present-day Haiti as well as of numerous Haitian migrant communities found throughout the New World (Holm 1988:353-404; Laëthier 2007). The HC varieties spoken in Cuba and the Dominican Republic's Samaná Peninsula are the object of this research proposal.

Present-day HC is well described (Valdman 1978; Fattier 1998 & elsewhere; DeGraff 2007; cf. Lefebvre 1998 for Montreal) and the diasporic communities of Suriname and French Guyana receive a good amount of sociolinguistic attention (Laëthier 2006 and elsewhere). The HC varieties in Cuba and Samaná, however, have remained entirely understudied. Nevertheless, the documentation of these varieties is highly promising. The two communities were founded in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively, developing in relative isolation from Haiti. Consequently, the two varieties can be expected to be linguistically conservative and, thus, to provide a unique window on the early stages of the development of HC. Moreover, since HC is at the heart of the afore-mentioned debate on creole genesis, insight into its earlier stages could constitute a major breakthrough in that debate. Against this background, the project strives to:

1. document and provide a grammatical sketch of Cuban and Samaná HC;
2. use the data as a tool in casting new light on the early stages of HC;
3. analyze the data in light of the intriguing and hotly debated question of creole genesis.

As such, the project aims to contribute not only to the historical and linguistic study of HC, but to the fields of creole studies and contact linguistics more generally.

3 Originality and implications of the project

3.1 First documentation of Cuban and Samaná HC

The presence of Haitians in Cuba from the 18th century onwards is well-known but poorly studied (Ortiz López 1999:177). The only available Cuban HC data consist of some mixed HC-Spanish songs (Alén Rodríguez 1986 and elsewhere; Betancur Álvarez 1993). Similar observations apply to Samaná HC: it "has never been studied" (Holm 2000:90, cf. Lipski 2005:173) and data on the variety are lacking.

Whenever the presence of HC in Samaná and Cuba is mentioned in writing, it is discussed in terms of its possible influence on the locally dominant languages (Spanish in Cuba; Spanish and Black English in Samaná) (e.g. Perl 1981; Ortiz López 1998 and elsewhere; Figueroa Arencibia 2007; Lipski 1994 and elsewhere; González & Benavides 1982; Singler 2007a/b; Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001). While these works are invaluable to the study of Afro-Hispanic and Black English varieties, they tell us nothing about the idiosyncrasies of Samaná and Cuban HC, a gap this project aims to fill.

3.2 Unique insight into early stages of HC

The documentation of Cuban and Samaná HC can provide a new and unique window on the early stages of HC. This is all the more important in light of the fact that historical written sources that could illustrate earlier stages of HC are scarce.

The presence of HC speakers in Samaná dates to the first half of the 19th century. Samaná HC has developed in isolation from Haiti and French ever since (Reinecke 1937:317; Demorizi 1973:30; González & Benavides 1982:125; Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001:20; Lipski 2005:111-115; Valdez 2007). This is why Holm (2000:90) and Lipski (2005:172) explicitly assume Samaná HC to be a conservative and archaic variety of HC.

On Cuba, Haitians are quite numerous. However, south east Cuba is home to pockets of Haitians whose ancestors arrived in the late 18th (following the Haitian slave revolt from 1791-1804) and 19th centuries and who have had no significant contact with recent arrivals from Port-au-Prince (Yacou 1994; Perl 1994; Ortiz López 1999 and elsewhere; Lipski 2005:103-111). Their speech, like Samaná HC, is likely to contain archaic and conservative features at different levels of the grammar (John Lipski, p.c., 16-11-2011).

Knowing what HC originally looked like, in turn, will help resolve the ongoing debate on creole genesis.

3.3 Implications for debate on creole genesis

By casting light on the early stages of HC, this project may have far-reaching implications for our understanding of the hotly debated issue of creole genesis.

The creolistic literature has long reflected a widespread consensus that creoles descend from pidgins. In this view, (a) creolization is a unique process involving ‘broken transmission’; (b) creoles are unrelated to the lexifier language (French in the case of HC); and (c) creoles form a typological class distinct from non-creoles (e.g. Hall 1966; Bickerton 1981; Thomason & Kaufman 1988; and elsewhere). These assumptions have recently been challenged by scholars who dismiss the idea of a preceding pidgin phase and instead postulate that creoles (a) arise through cross-linguistically common processes of second language acquisition; (b) are direct descendants of their lexical source language; and (c) are definable only in terms of their socio-historical background (Chaudenson 1992; Mufwene 2000; DeGraff 2001; and elsewhere). In response to this scholarship, scholars such as McWhorter (e.g. 1998), Parkvall (e.g. 2008), and Bakker et al. (2011) now attempt to reinforce the ‘original’ idea of a pidgin-creole cycle.

HC plays a central role in this debate. Tellingly, authors on both sides of the debate have appealed to HC data to bolster their respective positions. For instance, DeGraff (2001) puts forward the surprisingly rich derivational morphology in modern HC as evidence that this creole never went through an initial (morphologically poor) pidgin phase. Parkvall (2006), however, posits that modern HC must have acquired its derivational morphology *subsequent* to creolization due to ongoing contact with French. Crucially, in the absence of documentation of the early stages of HC, Parkvall claims that “definitive proof for either position may be impossible to produce” (2006:316). The documentation of Cuban and Samaná HC can change this state of affairs. After all, the “pidgin-to-creole” hypothesis necessarily implies that early HC contained considerably less productive French-derived morphology than present-day HC does. Since Cuban and Samaná HC reflect the early stages of development of HC, the data collected in this

project allow us to empirically test this premise. Although morphology is clearly pivotal in the debate, other levels of the grammar (particularly lexicon, semantics and syntax) may also provide clues in favor or against HC's alleged former pidginhood.

A related and also heavily debated issue concerns the role of sub- and superstrate languages in creole genesis. Again, HC plays a crucial role: Lefebvre (1986 and elsewhere) and Lumsden (e.g. 1991) view the formation of HC as a far-reaching process of relexification of (mainly) Fongbe towards French. This goes against Bickerton (1981, etc.) and others who have rejected the possibility of any significant substrate contribution in creole genesis. Data on the conservative, archaic HC varieties of Cuba and Samaná could cast new light on the density of substrate features in the early stages of HC, and thus provide decisive evidence in one or the other direction.

3.4 Revitalization and long-term preservation of HC in the Diaspora

The proposed research not only directly affects the study of HC and creole genesis; it will also contribute to the revitalization and long-term preservation of two diasporic HC varieties that are severely endangered at present.

Once numerically prominent (Schomburgk 1852; Hoetink 1972; Moya Pons 1978; Félix Félix 2008), the number of HC-speakers in Samaná at present is drastically reduced and linguistic assimilation is ongoing. This project might provide the sort of attention necessary to revitalize HC in Samaná. As an example: a diasporic variety of Trinidadian French Creole was once the principal language of the Venezuelan Güiría Peninsula. Pressure from Spanish caused it to rapidly lose vitality in the latter half of the 20th century (Llorrente 1995). However, renewed scholarly interest and documentation efforts led to a recent revival of this diasporic variety (see Ferreira 2009). This project can have similar effects on Samaná HC: the scholarly attention may achieve more positive speaker attitudes and thus increase the chances of preservation of HC in Samaná.

Although HC on Cuba is not endangered *per se* (due to the fact that Haitians continue to arrive on the island), it is nonetheless heavily stigmatized and enjoys low status *vis-à-vis* Cuban Spanish. The attention this project will pay to Cuban HC could contribute to more positive speaker attitudes, strengthen the social position of Haitians on Cuba and help maintain the linguistic diversity on the island.

As such, the project will support the consolidation of linguistic diversity in the respective regions. Moreover, given the correlation between language and identity, strengthening the vitality of Cuban and Samaná HC means strengthening the often precarious social position of Haitian migrants in these regions.

4 Methodology

4.1 Fieldwork

On Cuba, fieldwork will be centered in the eastern and south eastern provinces of Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo, Camagüey and Ciego de Ávila. In Samaná, archaic HC is reportedly spoken in the villages of Tesón and Las Galeras and in the south-east of Samaná. A two-month pilot fieldtrip is scheduled at the beginning of the project in order to more precisely determine the locations and sizes of the speaker communities and establish the necessary contacts with potential consultants and local research units.

Audio and video recordings will be made of a broad range of communicative events using a broad array of elicitation strategies depending on local circumstances and practical considerations. Obtaining informed consent of the consultants will be a priority. To support the data analyses and ensure the long-term value of the recordings, all relevant contextual information will be catalogued. The digital audio recordings will be annotated using ELAN and Toolbox and archived in a structured corpus.

4.2 Dissemination of results

Interim findings and results will be presented at international conferences and published in specialist journals. The end product will be a monograph in which detailed sketch grammars of Cuban and Samaná HC introduce an innovative treatise, examining Cuban/Samaná HC in historical and synchronic contrast with the standard varieties of Haiti and Montreal and discussing the implications for the debate on creole genesis.

5 Outlook: Online interactive Haitian Creole Diversity Database

The material collected and archived in this project will serve as a point of departure for an online interactive database that maps the linguistic diversity within HC, covering all its diasporic varieties as well as the three principal dialects of Haiti (see Fattier 1998). Besides offering a spectacular tool for comparative research, the HC Diversity Database opens up exciting perspectives for collaboration with research units around the world working on Haitian Creole.

To give just one example of the database's application, it can help us gain novel insights into how the dialectal division of Haitian Creole into Northern, Western and Southern Haitian is reflected in the Diaspora. Using Fattier's (1998) groundbreaking Atlas as a tool in establishing which forms dominate in which regions of Haiti, it can be established where the different diasporic communities have drawn their features from. Furthermore, we will be able to determine whether, or to what extent, dialect leveling and koineization have occurred. For instance, it will be interesting to see whether the (covert) prestige of Port-au-Prince Haitian has led (or leads) to a collapse of dialect features in the Diaspora.³

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